The Olympic Games: Ancient and Modern

In the twenty-first century, the Olympic Games have become one of the most iconic institutions in the world, capturing public attention on an international level and providing a focus for the communication of a wide range of social, political and cultural issues. In some ways, the same was true of the Olympic Games in classical antiquity, which developed as a powerful symbol of Panhellenic culture and provided a forum for communication and interchange between Greek city-states. This activity, then, gets us thinking about the similarities and differences between the ancient and modern Olympics: have they remained essentially the same in terms of function, arrangement and significance, or do they represent altogether different institutions?

The answer, of course, is a bit of both, and you need to be aware of the intellectual limitations of committing to an answer that is too black-and-white. Nonetheless, this activity would lend itself well to a group presentation or a debate, with one side arguing that there is a high level of continuity, and the other that the Olympics have changed beyond recognition.

Below, I have identified a few areas that you might consider. These are by no means exhaustive or prescriptive, and you should use your own initiative and creativity in answering this question. Above all, you should try to think what is at stake in how the relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is played out in the Olympic Games.

The Activity
What are the major similarities and differences between the Olympic Games in the ancient world, and those celebrated in the twenty-first century?
A few areas for consideration:

**When were the Games held?**

The first Olympic Games were held in 776 B.C., and were subsequently held every four years. In antiquity, time could be measured by Olympiads, periods of four years corresponding to the Olympic Games (the first Olympiad was 776 – 772 B.C.).

While this four-yearly cycle is maintained by the modern Olympic Games, they are no longer considered suitable as a measure of chronology.

Find out when in the year the ancient Games were held, and compare this to modern practice. How has the *length* of the Games changed over time?

**Where were they held?**

The ancient Olympics were always held at the Greek cult centre of Olympia, whereas the modern ones are held at different locations around the world every time, depending on the strength of the bid. However, it is important to note that Olympia was something of a Pan-Hellenic centre. Why, then, do you think this site may have been chosen for the ancient Games? And does the principle behind its location have anything in common with the diverse locations of the modern Games?
Map showing the location of the Summer Olympic Games from their re-inception at Athens in 1896 until 2012, when they will be hosted by London. Countries that have hosted one Summer Olympics are shaded green, while countries that have hosted two or more are shaded blue.

**Who could participate?**

Only free men who spoke Greek could participate in the ancient Olympics. Think: how is participation in the modern Olympics different? Why do you think women and slaves were not allowed to participate? And what broader changes in human values does this shift in Olympic participation represent?

It has been observed that there were significant advantages for rich, elite participants in the Games. What do you think these were, and how do you think that discrimination has been redressed in the modern Games?

It is not the case that women were not allowed to engage in sporting competitions at all. Find out what the ‘Heraia’ were; do you think that this put men and women on an equal footing?
Who organised them?

Originally, the Games were organised by officials from Olympia itself. However, from 570 B.C. onwards the Games came under the control of the larger city of Elis about 60 km north of Olympia, and were organised by an increasingly complex body of Hellanodikai (judges and organisers of the Games), umpires and priests. Find out who is responsible for organising today’s Games and think about how this compares to the ancient organisation.

Map showing the Peloponnese and the location of Olympia, the nearby town of Pisa and the city of Elis

What different competitions did the Games comprise?

Compile a list of the various competitions included in the ancient Games, and a list of those incorporated into the modern Olympics. Then identify the ones that only occur on one list: think why these differences occur.
Vase painting showing a four-horse chariot prepared for competition. Do animals play any role in modern Olympics? Why do you think this is the case?

What was the role of musical competitions in the ancient Olympics? Have any aspects of these competitions survived in the modern Games?
The role of religion

Olympia was above all a cult centre, dedicated to the worship of Zeus, and it was in this god’s honour that the ancient Olympic Games were held. Because all Greek city-states engaged in the worship of this god, the Games were an opportunity for communities across Greece to share their values, religion and rituals.

Today, the Olympic Games have become a predominantly secular institution, and have very little emphasis on religion. Why do you think religion and religious ritual carry so little emphasis in today’s games?

Nonetheless, the ceremonies surrounding the Games normally offer an opportunity for the hosting country to put its own traditions, iconography and values on display to the rest of the world. For what reasons do you think such localised display is acceptable to the global community?
How did people respond to the Games?

Use the online resources for this activity to find evidence of contemporary evaluations of the Olympic Games. It is not difficult to find great enthusiasm for and endorsements of the Games both in antiquity and in the modern world, but is there any evidence of criticism? If so, what is the nature of the criticism offered? Did ancient observers respond to the Games in the same sort of ways, and for the same reasons, as modern observers?
The spectators of the games in Berlin in 1936 see not only the Olympic flag waving in the air, but also many flags with the swastika, a good example of the Nazi propaganda at the games.

Going further

One related area you might explore is the role of ‘blood sports’ in antiquity, and its relationship to modern sport. Why were Romans so fascinated by gladiatorial combat? Have violent competitions really been eliminated from sports in the modern West?